

SERMONSECOND
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CHURCH

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No Home for the Kingdom

Luke 4:14-30

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Jesus gets off to an incredibly rough start in Luke's Gospel. Just start at verse one and make your way to our text for today, and you see a tough beginning: His mother's pregnancy is the latest rumor. He gets born in a nothing of a town, and, before he knows what's happening, he's placed in a manger because somebody forgot to make reservations at the inn. He's wrapped in bands of cloth—no Baby Gap for this kid. Before he can even get settled into his hay for a decent night's sleep, some shepherds come stomping in from the fields and spout some wild tale about what the angels had told them. (To top it off, every time he starts to cry, some hymn writer in the corner shushes him!)

Then, a few weeks later, he's taken to the Temple to be dedicated to the Lord when an old man named Simeon comes up to his family with the strangest blessing of all: "I can depart in peace; but this kid's destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed." Just what every parent wants to hear about their child! A troublemaker from the start.

Then Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph do the unthinkable. They lose the Son of God. He's only twelve years old and his parents let him wander off in the crowd. And can you imagine what the kids at school will think when they learn what Jesus did with his newfound freedom? "You mean you were on your own in the big city and you went to the Temple? What were you thinking, Jesus?"

The next years pass so quickly that Luke doesn't give us much detail. Before we know it, Jesus is baptized and Luke tells us that the Spirit descended *into* him, and then Jesus is led by that same Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted for forty days.

Talk about your rough beginnings. We're barely into the fourth chapter of Luke, and already Jesus has experienced more than any victim in one of those made-for-tv movies of the week—questionable circumstances surrounding his birth, humble beginnings, strange prophecies by angels and other visitors, predictions of opposition; getting lost by his parents; a stirring baptism, and the ordeal of testing in the wilderness. All of this before his public ministry even begins.

Finally, after all of the turmoil of the first chapters, Jesus hits the trail and the press is giving him rave reviews. By the time he heads for home, he's something of a local boy made good.

Thank God he's finally going home. What is it the poet said? "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."¹ Only the folks at Nazareth had a slightly different version. Theirs went something like this: "Home is the place where, when you start to preach here, we want to *do* you in."

Perhaps you remember that Matthew and Mark also tell this story, but they place the story in a different place. Matthew and Mark use the arrest of John as the signal for Jesus' ministry to begin, but not Luke.

By placing the story where he does, Luke sacrifices chronology for theology. Both Mark and Matthew place the story later in their gospels, after an extended time of ministry by Jesus. But in this context, Luke reveals a strong connection between Jesus' baptism and his ministry. The power of the Spirit is the thread linking these movements together—the Spirit descends in baptism; after baptism, Jesus is filled with the Spirit; the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness; then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit begins to teach in the synagogues. Finally, when Jesus stands up to read from the scriptures in Nazareth, this is what we hear, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...."

By placing it here in this location, Luke is giving us a quick summary of his entire gospel. This story shows us how Jesus understands what God has sent him to do. It reminds us that his ministry is going to involve things like

*bringing good news to the poor,
and proclaiming release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
letting the oppressed go free,
proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor."*

...and that means that our ministry in his name is going to be about the same things.

But the story also functions here to show us what the response will be to Jesus and the church. And that question will move the rest of Luke's story: Will the people accept Jesus or not?

Nowhere is that question more alive than when Jesus enters the synagogue in Nazareth. When he is finished reading from Isaiah, he hands the scroll back to the attendant and sits down. All eyes are on Jesus as the people wonder what Jesus will say about one of their cherished passages, which they longed to have fulfilled. Luke does not say whether Jesus offered any other reflection than this: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Had Jesus stopped there, he surely would have been invited to someone's house for lunch after the service. Luke indicates that the congregational response was favorable—all spoke well of him. They were proud that Joseph's son had turned into such an upstanding citizen and came from their synagogue.

But like a preacher who misses a good stopping point, Jesus starts up again. In fact, he seems to be goading the people—what Jesus says actually causes the rejection.

He begins his second foray by quoting two proverbs: Surely you will say, "Doctor, cure yourself," and you will ask me to do the things that you have heard I did in Capernaum.

The second proverb is this: "Truly no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." These proverbs seem to indicate that Jesus figured the people would expect to see the same extraordinary things that they had been hearing about, but that his closeness to them would prevent them from recognizing these things.

The problem, however, lies far deeper than blind familiarity. If the people of Nazareth assumed privileges for themselves, that error is joined to a more serious one: their resentment

¹ From the poem "Death of the Hired Hand," by Robert Frost.

that Jesus has taken God's favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially Capernaum, said to have had a heavy non-Jewish population.

Jesus then reminds his hearers of stories from their own tradition. He compares his ministry to that of Elijah and Elisha, two heroes of the faith. These stories are bound together only by the fact that in both the prophetic visitation was extended to Gentiles—outside the boundaries of the people Israel.

When the people realized that God's prophetic messiah would be for "all flesh" and not just for them, they moved from the edges of their seats to the edge of a cliff. They were filled with such rage at the radical grace of God that they were ready to kill the One for whom they had hoped. This rejection by the people—his own family, neighbors, and friends—reveals the truth of the proverb Jesus invoked: the people did not accept the prophet of God whose words were acceptable to God.

So why isn't a prophet accepted at home? Well, it could be because the people know the prophet too well. You know, you tend to lose your prophetic fervor when you make your way to the pulpit through a group of folks who gleefully tell you, "Remember, I used to change your diapers when you were a kid"

Of course, it could be that a prophet's not accepted at home because the prophet knows the people too well. It's been said that the greatest challenge to prophetic preaching is the prophet's love for the people. The prophet simply doesn't want to say anything that would hurt the hearer.

Yes, prophets aren't accepted at home because the people know them too well. And it's also true that a prophet's not accepted because of their knowledge of and love for the people. But there seems to be something more to it than that.

Do you think a prophet isn't accepted at home because no single hometown is large enough to hold the kingdom of God? Over time, we become so comfortable in our hometowns that we lose sight of other people and places. We begin to think that all that's necessary for life is found among us, and that other expressions of life are not valid. But the kingdom of God keeps smashing through the boundaries of every hometown we've ever known.

Jesus' sermon at home got him in trouble because he dared to make space for difference, to push beyond the customary boundaries of the people's expectations of the ways that God bestows grace. Even though the people of Israel had been reminded from the first words of the covenant—they were to be a blessing for the blessing of the world—when Jesus spoke of the ways that God was at work outside the customary boundaries of their national identity, it was enough to make the people reject one of their own, even one whose message was acceptable to God.

The moment that Jesus started to question his hearers' special status, he went from favorite son to unwelcome stranger, who offended them so badly they decided to throw him off the cliff. That, says one commentator, is how sensitive we are to being told that our enemies are God's friends. No matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to get God to respect our boundaries. God keeps plowing right through them, inviting us to follow or get out of the way. The problem is not that we are loved any less. The problem is the people we cannot stand are loved just as much as we are—loved by a God with an upsetting sense of community and a much wider view of the world.